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Coherence on Trial: The Coronavirus Outbreak as a Critical Test for the European Union

Abstract

Starting in Wuhan in December 2019, and making its way all the way to Rome and New York in April 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic has put the states, alliances and others, square in the face of a serious challenge. However, the question that happens to be a stumbling block this time has never been posed as a problem or obstacle before – the question of public health; a question that has taught the European Union a lesson about what is a top priority and how all the other policies, plans and strategies may seem unimportant overnight. This paper provides an analysis on how the European Union coped with the global threat given its limited legal possibilities, and the unprecedented situation of its Member States becoming the second outbreak point of the pandemic. Moreover, the COVID-19 pandemic, once again, has opened up the question of solidarity and the coherence within the EU. The conclusions drawn from this research are of great importance as a way to show whether the EU will come out of this situation with a positive outcome, confirming its values of solidarity and coherence, or whether it will have to undertake drastic reforms in order to consolidate the latter.

Keywords: Pandemic, Values, Response, Coronavirus

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Introduction

Every strategy and policy, both at national and international levels, has been tested and analysed to function under more or less regular circumstances. All of these strategies and policies fall into disrepair when there are unforeseen and unprecedented situations that bring about shifts at all levels of national and international relations. Moreover, the shifts are greater if the reason for them is one that has never or rarely been presented as a problem of international importance before. On January 23rd, 2020, the city of Wuhan and its 9-million inhabitants in central China goes under lockdown in an attempt to prevent a new and deadly Coronavirus from spreading across the country and beyond.¹ On the first day of the lockdown, the number of people infected in Wuhan was 495.² On January 30th, 2020, the Director-General of the World Health Organization Dr. Tedros A. Ghebreyesus declared a global state of emergency of international concern,³ the same day that the first human transmission of the virus was registered in Chicago, USA.⁴ In the following two weeks, six European countries register cases. On March 12th, 2020, the pandemic of COVID-19, a Coronavirus-induced disease, is declared after the number of cases in the European region reaches a staggering 20,000 and the death toll rises to more than 1,000.⁵ From then on, this number has not stopped growing.

The governments have closed schools, institutions and borders, restricted movement, introduced quarantine and social distancing, abolished public transport and banned mass gatherings, introduced alternative ways of communicating and working remotely – all in order to prevent the mass spread of the virus or at least to prevent exponential growth in the number of patients, in order to enable health systems to respond appropriately.

¹ CGTN, ed., *The lockdown: One month in Wuhan* (motion picture), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XU9FVqwO4TM&t=199s> (access 10.08.2020).

² Ibidem.

³ World Health Organization, *COVID 19 Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)* (Publication), [https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-public-health-emergency-of-international-concern-\(pheic\)-global-research-and-innovation-forum](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-public-health-emergency-of-international-concern-(pheic)-global-research-and-innovation-forum) (access 24.07.2020).

⁴ L. Schencker, J. Villagomez, *First US person-to-person case of Coronavirus reported in Chicago. 'We believe people in Illinois are at low risk'*, Chicago Tribune, <https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-biz-illinois-spread-person-to-person-Coronavirus-20200130-yqbxfhqotvagdmvc5ibgvvwugy-story.html> (access 24.07.2020).

⁵ World Health Organization, *COVID 19 Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)*, [https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-public-health-emergency-of-international-concern-\(pheic\)-global-research-and-innovation-forum](https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/covid-19-public-health-emergency-of-international-concern-(pheic)-global-research-and-innovation-forum) (access 24.07.2020).

The Coronavirus pandemic has turned almost every facet of social life in its head, and we will not be far from the truth if we say that in some way it was the end of the world as we knew it. Among other things, it was a blow to the efficiency and capability of global institutions; they seem to have betrayed humanity when people needed joint action the most. Inevitably, one of the loudest accusations were aimed against the European Union, pointing out that it betrayed its Member States as well as other smaller and weaker states that relied on its support but were left alone in the most difficult moments.

Therefore, in this paper we will try to conclude how the pandemic has affected the European Union, whether and why it missed the opportunities to act at certain points of time and what could have been done differently, especially in the context of Italy and Spain as the EU's outbreak point. From this experience, we will give certain conclusions regarding the specific nature of the EU as a supranational and intergovernmental regime that acts as a collective body but depends on its individual entities – the EU Member States.

Solidarity and Coherence under Attack

The EU could be defined as a multi-level and complex post-national structure with post-modern nature that has developed its own way of interpretation and arrangement of internal and external affairs. The EU is not a nation-state, and therefore cannot be treated as a modern structure. The EU is postmodern actor which operates in a postmodern world, beyond the nation-state limits, as a postnational structure. Postnationalism should be treated as a process that complements and supplements the nation-states' performances, based upon the principles of mutual understanding, mutual openness and networking, oriented towards achieving the transcendental objectives, and thus, transcending the nation-states limits.

Solidarity is a value ever-present in the basis of the EU and most of its Member States. The EU treaties explicitly refer to solidarity in a number of provisions, including the values and objectives of the Union and particular policies where the "principle" or the "spirit" of solidarity is to be applied.⁶ Another value that is often discussed as a core to the EU's complexity is coherence, or the value of bringing together all of its parts (Member States and institutions) into a harmonized mechanism of action from both internal and external aspects. The coherence comes from "the necessity for har-

⁶ European Commission, Solidarity in Europe – Alive and active (policy review), European Union, https://ec.europa.eu/research/social-sciences/pdf/policy_reviews/solidarity_in_europe.pdf (access 24.07.2020).

monization of parallel functioning political areas and managing of implications of structural complexity”.⁷ As far as the term ‘coherence’ goes, there are many definitions. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines coherence as: “systematic or logical connection or consistency” or “integration of diverse elements, relationships, or values”,⁸ while the Oxford’s Lexico defines it as: “the quality of being logical and consistent”⁹ or “the quality of forming a unified whole”.¹⁰ The Cambridge Dictionary defines coherence as “the situation when the parts of something fit together in a natural or reasonable way”¹¹ or “a clear relationship between parts”.¹²

It can be summarized that coherence means the ability of the parts or units from one whole or an entity to make common ground for action, based on shared values, common interests or common goals.

The author Christopher Hill defines coherence as: “the ability to pull together diverse strands of policy and those responsible for managing them, into a single efficient whole, capable of action, and resistant to third parties’ attempts to exploit internal division”.¹³ The theorists Joseph Jupille and James A. Caporaso claim that coherence determines whether or not an entity is an actor, because “to be an actor implies a minimal level of cohesion”.¹⁴ Therefore, it must be emphasized that only the states and other forms of political unions similar to them (federations or confederations), naturally possess the coherence *in stricto sensu*. In contrast, the EU’s nature is quite problematic to define, as the EU often (incoherently) reflects the political views of its Member States, and thus sometimes appearing as an international organization, and while at other times as

⁷ C. Hill, M. Smith, *International relations and the European Union*, Oxford University Press, 2019.

⁸ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/coherence> (access 8.10.2020).

⁹ *Lexico*, <https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/coherence> (access 8.10.2020).

¹⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹¹ *Cambridge Dictionary*, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/coherence> (access 8.10.2020).

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ P. Thaler, *Un-packing Coherence in EU Foreign Policy: How Policy Setting and Policy Content Shape EU External Relations Towards Russia*, PhD diss., Central European University: Doctoral School of Political Science, Public Policy and International Relations, https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/578b/62c4017ce78c1928a3c98cda5746bc55d0db.pdf?_ga=2.171243043.223076566.1572551180-586721100.1572551180, 2015, p. 32 (access 8.10.2020).

¹⁴ K. Keisala, *The EU as an international actor: Strengthens of the European civilian power*, PhD diss., University of Tampere: Faculty of Social Sciences, <https://trepo.tuni.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/67439/951-44-6157-6.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, 2004, p. 84 (access 8.10.2020).

a state. In order to define more accurately the phenomenon of coherence, Joseph Jupille and James A. Caporaso noted four different dimensions (Table 1): 1) value cohesion; 2) tactical cohesion; 3) procedural cohesion; and 4) output cohesion.¹⁵ Observing how the EU works, we added another dimension, the *cohesion of preferences* which implies the ability of the European Union and its Member States to establish a single approach based on setting up common (post-national) goals and objectives. This type of cohesion refers to where, when and how to act, primarily taking into account EU interests as a whole. Consequently, EU leaders must work together, in order “to increase cohesiveness [...] [and thus to] provide the EU with a distinctive identity”.¹⁶

Table 1. The Dimensions of Cohesion (the author’s own depiction, based on Jupille and Caporaso’s cohesion typology)

	Value Cohesion	Tactical Cohesion	Procedural Cohesion	Output Cohesion	Cohesion of Preferences
COHESION DIMENSIONS	Owens inclusive and integrative function, referring to the similarity and compatibility of basic goals.	Appears in conditions of disharmonious political views of the Member States within the EU if goals are different but can be made to fit one another.	Implies some consensus on rules and procedures used to process those issues where conflict arises and, thus, agreement on basic rules by which policies are made.	Refers to the situation where the Member States of the EU succeed in formulating policies regardless of the level of substantive or procedural agreement.	Connected with the ability of the EU and the Member States to establish a single approach based on setting up transcendental objectives and goals. This dimension refers to where, when and how to act, primarily taking into account EU interests as a whole, not in fragmentary pieces.
BASIS	Values	Compromise	Procedures	Results	Common (post-national) interest

Source: K. Keisala, *The EU as an international actor: Strengthens of the European civilian power*, PhD diss., University of Tampere: Faculty of Social Sciences, <https://trepo.tuni.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/67439/951-44-6157-6.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>, 2004, p. 84 (access 8.10.2020).

¹⁵ Ibidem.

¹⁶ R. Grajauskas, *Federal Europe: A Postmodern Force in International Relations?*, <http://www.federalistdebate.org/index.php/component/k2/item/63-federal-europe-a-postmodern-force-in-international-relations> (access 30.04.2020).

Since the Coronavirus outbreak, every statement, declaration, meeting, almost every single sentence consisting the word “COVID-19” starts with the words “unpredicted”, “unprecedented” and every other synonym that marks the state of surprise to the humanity of the appearance of this virus. However, the EU High Representative Josep Borrell acknowledged: “The Coronavirus pandemic was predictable [because] infectious disease experts have been warning us for years about the acceleration in the spread of epidemics. This is the third novel beta Coronavirus in the past 20 years that has been able to cross the species barrier”.¹⁷ Bearing this in mind, the obvious question arises: How did we not see this coming? It took the EU almost two months to properly move its bureaucratic machinery. And that is, since the announcement of the global state of emergency of international concern on January 30th, 2020. There were certain actions taken though, related to the threat in this period, such as the activation of the IPCR,¹⁸ several meetings of the Health Council (Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council), some recommendations on travelling in and out of the EU, assessments of the possible impact on different areas such as industry, education etc. However, none of it meant direct measures for rapid response to the spread of the virus, although it was obvious with every single day that passed, the number of infected and deceased people would only increase. As a result, “the first instinct of Europe’s nations has been to turn inwards, closing borders and hoarding supplies without much thought for coordination”.¹⁹

One of the strongest blows to the EU’s coherence and solidarity happened on 26th March, 2020 when Germany and the Netherlands stood out strongly against the initiative of Italy, Spain, Portugal and France to issue joint bonds to help finance an economic stimulus, during a virtual summit of the European Council held by video conference.²⁰ As if

¹⁷ J. Borrell, *The post-Coronavirus world is already here* (policy brief), https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_post_Coronavirus_world_is_already_here?fbclid=IwAR0Xe0wdTnUxUiOrN1k790HIxYFW1Ddj1vcJx_NeS09jvnBgpH0cDU3b-Spg (access 30.04.2020).

¹⁸ IPCR (Integrated Political Crisis Response) is the EU’s framework for coordinating sectoral crises. Through this mechanism, the Presidency of the Council coordinates the political response to the crisis at the highest level.

¹⁹ M. Vestager, *The European Response to the Covid-19 Virus*, ICDS – International Center for Defense and Security, <https://icds.ee/the-european-response-to-the-covid-19-virus/> (access 30.05.2020).

²⁰ B. Rios, F. Schulz, G. Fortuna, J. Valero, *Leaders clash over stimulus against pandemic, pass hot potato to Eurogroup*, Euractiv, <https://www.euractiv.com/section/economy-jobs/news/leaders-clash-over-stimulus-against-pandemic-pass-the-hot-potato-to-the-eurogroup/> (access 24.07.2020).

this wasn't enough trouble, the sharing of medical equipment and border controls caused additional misunderstanding and opposed stands. This was followed by a series of reactions by high politicians both at the EU and national level as well. The French European Affairs minister Amelie de Montchalin said that the Coronavirus crisis raised existential questions for Europe, emphasizing that: "Our Europe is one of action, one of solidarity, and if certain countries see otherwise, well then the question of their place will raise itself, as will what the union should be doing as a group of 27".²¹ Furthermore, David Sassoli, President of the European Parliament, raised the question of the disunity in the face of the pandemic, asking: "Countries that are still hesitant about this – who will you sell your technology or tulips to, if the European market is not protected?".²² He posted this on his Twitter profile, in reference to Germany and the Netherlands, both opposed to "coronabonds" to re-launch the EU economy. Although it is early to make political generalizations of chronological events, in our opinion this was the boiling point of the EU's crisis in reaching solidarity and cohesion according to its core values. Many statements and analyses to this day, as we believe will be the case in future efforts to explain this period, will point to this situation at this particular period of time when referring to the EU's failure to help its own countries to recover from the crisis. The outcome of this political drama was brought when the European Council passed it further to the Eurogroup, in order for them to try to propose solutions to the economic fallout from the Coronavirus.

Italy and Spain: The Weakest Link?

We have all heard about the efforts of the governments around the world introducing all sorts of protective measures, desperate to avoid "Italian or Spanish scenario", but what exactly does this mean? How and why did these particular countries get hit so hard and who is to blame?

Spain and Italy were Europe's two worst-hit countries by the COVID-19 pandemic and at one point in time were the world's second outbreak point after China. The two countries have a lot of common characteristics that

²¹ A. de Montchalin (twitter status), https://twitter.com/AdeMontchalin/status/1244232500827885568?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1244232500827885568%7Ctwgr%5E&ref= (access 19.03.2020).

²² D. Sassoli (twitter status), https://twitter.com/EP_President/status/1243930262720962562?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1243930262720962562%7Ctwgr%5E&ref= (access 24.07.2020).

were in favour of a fast spreading of the virus; specific cultures of high affection and socialization, mild climates, various densely populated cities and a large number of citizens of older age. Unfortunately, the government officials' nonchalance and self-confidence being way beyond reasonable was another specific trait shared by these two countries, especially in the first critical period of the spreading of the virus. Needless to say that if China and the other neighbouring countries (South Korea, Singapore) who had the first outbreak of the virus used the "unpredicted" as an excuse, Italy and Spain should have known better and used the successful strategies those countries had already developed (and avoid the ones that gave bad results). The first of many failures in the Italian response to the outbreak was underestimating the speed the virus was spreading with, thus failing to make timely decisions as the crisis was rising. At the end of February, as the first cases of local transmission were appearing in Northern Italy, some politicians decided to make bold public appearances; Nicola Zingaretti for example, the leader of the center-left Democratic Party (who was later diagnosed to be positive with the Coronavirus), appeared in a bar in Milan having the traditional late afternoon *aperitivo*, promoting the idea that Italy should avoid "destroying life or spreading panic".²³ To further worsen what was developing to be an almost uncontrollable crisis, Italy failed to act in coordination adequate to the level of emergency. When the government issued the first decree of the closing of Northern Italy on March 8th, 2020²⁴ the first reaction of the citizens of this region was fleeing to southern Italy, thereby unstoppably spreading the virus to other regions. The government also had disputes with regional governors who were calling for a more extensive response. The lack of coordination in fighting the virus at the national level was very strongly replicated at a local level also, which was particularly emphasized in the crisis management of Lombardy and Veneto, two neighbouring regions that were Italy's initial outbreak point. Lombardy, considered to be Italy's wealthiest region, had a very high rate of registered cases and deaths covering a period of almost two months dating from the end of February to the beginning of April. Veneto fared significantly better, lowering the number of cases in a very short period of time. This result came thanks to an extensive approach; based on broad testing and a strong emphasis on home care which reduced the hospitals' burden. Experts said the so-called

²³ L. Besser, *Italy's Coronavirus disaster: At first, officials urged people to go out for an aperitif. Now, doctors must choose who dies*, ABC News, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-03-18/what-went-wrong-with-how-italy-handled-Coronavirus/12062242> (access 24.07.2020).

²⁴ Ibidem.

“Veneto model” could have been used early on to shape both regional and central policies. That, however, only happened more than a month from the start of the outbreak. The same day a quarantine zone was declared across Northern Italy, the Spanish government was encouraging people across the country to come out for International Women’s Day protests. Consequently, and disastrously from this perspective, “thousands of women across Spain marched [...] against gender inequality to mark International Women’s Day, despite concerns the gatherings could help the spread of Coronavirus”.²⁵ In the following days, three ministers and the first lady (all of them part of the Women’s day march) were tested positive for the Coronavirus.²⁶ Among them was Irene Monteno, the equality minister from the *Unidas Podemos* left-wing party, who tested positive only four days after the march.²⁷

On March 14th, 2020, six days after the International Women’s Day, the country was under total lockdown.²⁸ After that, Spain quickly fell behind in testing and only had enough resources to diagnose the most severe cases or those in essential workers by the time the state of emergency was declared. Later on, the country followed the lead of Veneto by developing a strategy to test the population more broadly.

At the same time, the EU failed to act collectively at a moment when these two Member States badly needed a display of solidarity, so they had no other choice but to impose their own restrictions, border controls, and ban the export of medical supplies. At the beginning of the crisis Italy seemed to receive more help from China than from its EU partners, and that diminished the EU’s reputation among Italian citizens. As if this wasn’t enough, when Italy (supported by France, Spain and seven other eurozone members) proposed that the EU issue “Coronabonds”,²⁹

²⁵ E. Rodriguez, *Thousands March in Spain on Women’s Day Despite Coronavirus Fears*, US News, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2020-03-08/thousands-march-in-spain-on-womens-day-despite-Coronavirus-fears> (access 24.07.2020).

²⁶ C.E. Cue, *More Spanish politicians confirm they have been infected with the Coronavirus*, El Pais, <https://english.elpais.com/society/2020-03-13/more-spanish-politicians-confirm-they-have-been-infected-with-the-Coronavirus.html> (access 10.08.2020).

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ P. Rolfe, L. Morris, *Spain goes on nationwide lockdown as Coronavirus cases surge*, Washington Post, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/Coronavirus-spain-nationwide-lockdown/2020/03/14/3bec8690-6619-11ea-8a8e-5c5336b32760_story.html (access 19.03.2020).

²⁹ A debt instrument that would allow all single-currency-using nations to borrow collectively. This instrument would allow pulling the risk between those who enjoy strong credit ratings – such as Germany and the Netherlands – and those with poor credit ratings – such as Italy.

the Germans and Dutch strongly opposed the idea. That provoked not only doubt in the EU's core values and the principle of solidarity but also a rising of euroscepticism, especially in Italy. On this occasion, the French president Emmanuel Macron emphasized that "the EU had no choice but to issue common debt with a common guarantee. The alternative was the collapse of the EU as a political project".³⁰ In the same time, Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, has sent a heartfelt apology to Italy on the EU's behalf for letting the country down.³¹

The EU's Response to the Coronavirus Crisis

The development of the European Union in both internal as external policies and relations is a continuing story. Throughout the years and treaties that had been adopted, it has introduced different approaches to advance and upgrade its coordination, coherence and responsiveness. However, the Coronavirus pandemic impudently emphasizes the EU in its entirety, with all of its strengths and weaknesses. A very important part of the bigger picture of the EU's reaction to the crisis is how the public saw it and what is left of the EU's reputation given the elaborated challenges and obstacles.

In order to better understand how this pandemic influenced the public opinion on the EU's ability to cope with the pandemic, we used the online survey method. This method "is hardly likely to lead to a representative sample",³² but it can provide *indicative data* for research. Exploratory studies are typically done for three purposes; "to satisfy the researcher's curiosity and desire for better understanding, to test the feasibility of undertaking a more extensive study, and to develop the methods to be employed in any subsequent studies".³³ The results obtained from this research are *indicative* and can be used to implement more complex and more comprehensive research in the future. Considering this method and the time framework provided for the implementation of this online sur-

³⁰ V. Mallet, R. Khalaf, *Macron warns of EU unravelling unless it embraces financial solidarity*, Financial Times, <https://www.ft.com/content/d19dc7a6-c33b-4931-9a7e-4a74674da29a> (access 10.08.2020).

³¹ J. Gill, *EU Commission President offers 'heartfelt apology' to Italy, as MEPs debate Coronavirus response*, Euronews, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/16/eu-commission-president-offers-heartfelt-apology-to-italy> (access 10.08.2020).

³² A. Crossman *Snowball Sample. About. com Sociology*, <http://sociology.about.com/od/Types-of-Samples/a/Snowball-Sample.htm> (access 08.10.2020).

³³ *Ibidem*.

vey, the sample size seems sufficient for extracting indicative results. The online survey was conducted for the period of 3 weeks (between May 13th, 2020 – June 4th, 2020) with 122 respondents. Almost half of the respondents were aged 30–45 (49%), nearly 40% were younger people aged 18–29 and nearly 10% were aged 46+.

The respondents were mostly familiar with the EU’s health, economic and security measures for dealing with the pandemic, slightly less with human rights protection measures and hardly knew or had heard of anything else (Table 1). On a scale of 1 to 5 on how timely and appropriate the measures taken by the EU were, most of the respondents graded it with a medium-good 3, with a tendency to go lower (Chart 2).

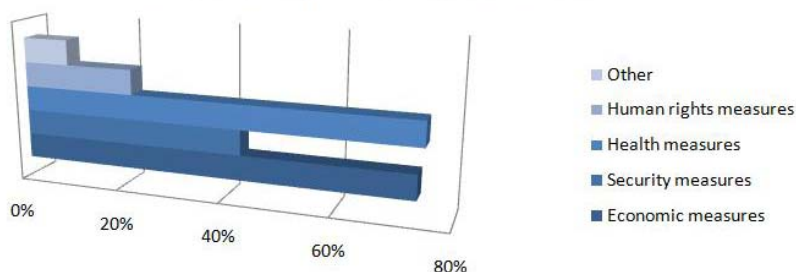


Chart 1. What measures has it taken do deal with Covid-19?

Source: Online survey: “The EU and COVID-19 pandemic”, 2020.

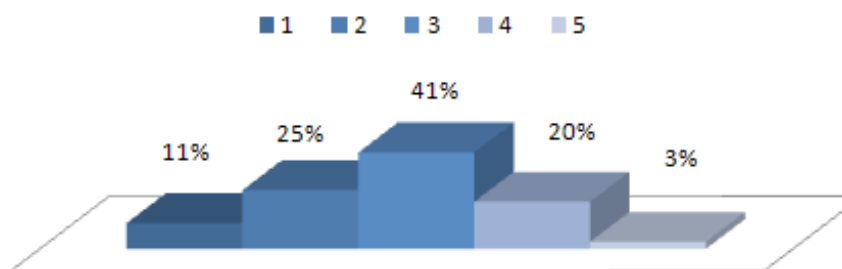


Chart 2. How timely and appropriate were the measures taken (scale 1–5)?

Source: Online survey: “The EU and COVID-19 pandemic”, 2020.

63% of the respondents found the crisis in Italy and Spain preventable suggesting both that the EU should have reacted quickly and directly helped them, and that their own governments should have shown a more serious approach instead of wasting precious time (Chart 3).

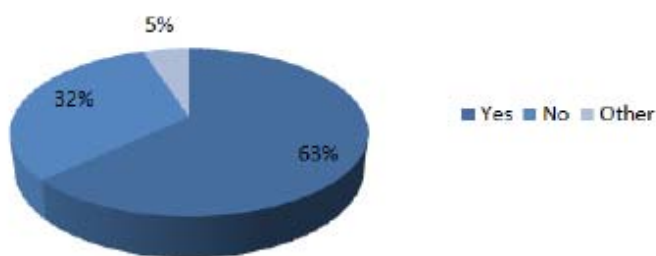


Chart 3. Was the outbreak in Italy and Spain preventable?

Source: Online survey: “The EU and COVID-19 pandemic”, 2020.

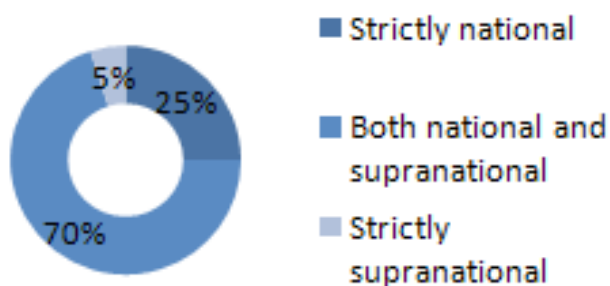


Chart 4. How the question of public health is treated in the EU?

Source: Online survey: “The EU and COVID-19 pandemic”, 2020.



Chart 5. Does a solution to the crisis in the EU require a supranational approach?

Source: Online survey: “The EU and COVID-19 pandemic”, 2020.

As we mentioned at the very beginning of this paper, the question of public health has rarely been presented as a matter of supranational approach, and our respondents (70% of them) think that it has been both

national as well as supranational. Somewhat expectedly, a bigger part of the remaining number think that it has been treated as a strictly national issue (25%) and only a few (5%) that it has been treated as a strictly supranational issue. Consequently, the vast majority of them (84%) believe that the solution to the COVID-19 crisis lies in a supranational approach particularly (Chart 4 and Chart 5).

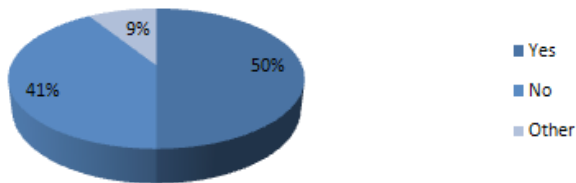


Chart 6. Do you believe EU member states will invest more in solidarity and coherence in the future?

Source: Online survey: “The EU and COVID-19 pandemic”, 2020.

Exactly half of the respondents answered in the affirmative that the EU would invest more in its coherence and solidarity in the future as a lesson learned from the Coronavirus pandemic. 41% didn’t believe anything would change regarding this matter, and the other 9% believed that this should be the case, but that it is not a simple job to do and requires a lot of changes not only in policies but also in people’s mindsets (Chart 6). In that sense, the EU High representative Josep Borrell stated: “Once the crisis is over, the people of Europe will deliver their own verdict on the approach taken by each member state and by Europe as a whole. This makes it vital for the EU to be seen as a player that is able to make a difference. This does not mean that it should take the place of the member states, but rather that it should build on their action to give meaning and substance to the fundamental issue at stake: the protection of the European model. But this model will only mean something in the eyes of the world if we can successfully promote solidarity among the member states. And, on that issue, we still have much to do”.³⁴

Just a little above the half-line mark, 51% of the respondents believed that the EU should have acted unilaterally without consulting its Mem-

³⁴ J. Borrell, *The post-Coronavirus world is already here* (policy brief), p. 13, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_post_Coronavirus_world_is_already_here?fbclid=IwAR0Xe0wdTnUxUiOrN1k790HlxYFW1Ddj1vcJx_NeS09jvnBgPH0-cDU3bSpG (access 30.04.2020).

ber States in order to manage the crisis better and 43% did not believe this should be the case. 6% of the respondents had a double opinion, considering that unilateral approach can be useful when solving this kind of issues but that the EU should not fall into a federal “traps” and should consider the positions of its Member States at all times (Chart 7).

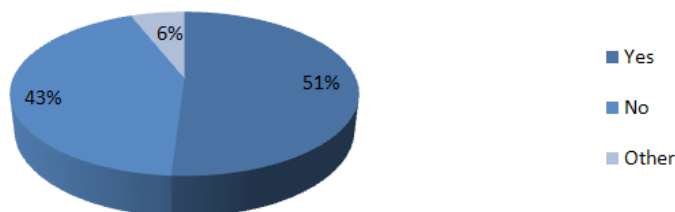


Chart 7. Do you think EU should have acted unilaterally without consulting its member states?

Source: Online survey: “The EU and COVID-19 pandemic”, 2020.

Regarding how appropriate the existing mechanisms and regulations of the EU are in relation to global emergencies, the results can be seen in Chart 8.

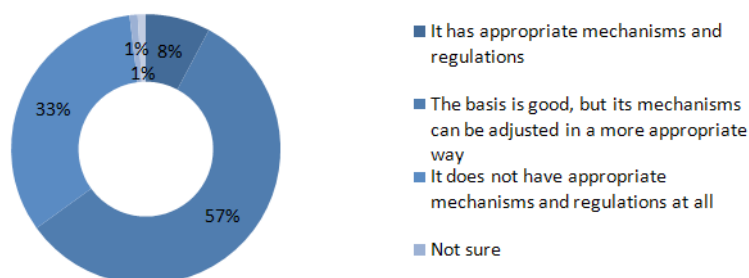


Chart 8. What do you think of EU mechanisms and regulations when dealing with a crisis?

Source: Online survey: “The EU and COVID-19 pandemic”, 2020.

45% of respondents found the European Commission to be the most suitable EU institution to call upon when dealing with such crises and emergencies.

The respondents gave very thoroughly-considered suggestions for the EU to achieve greater solidarity and coherence in the future, that range from better preparation of protocols and mechanisms for urgent reaction, shrinking and easing decision processes, improving equality and elimi-

nate elitism within its borders, to suggestions regarding further integration of its Member States into a political union.

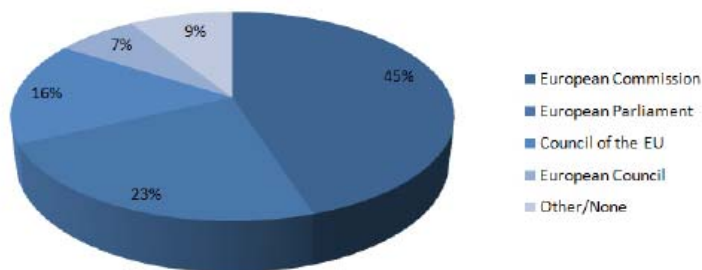


Chart 9. Which EU institution is the best suited to deal with such crisis?

Source: Online survey: “The EU and COVID-19 pandemic”, 2020.

Conclusions

In times of crisis, any policy-based strategy begins to fall apart. The EU is not designed to react quickly to unexpected situations – not because something is wrong with its functionality, but because its Member States have not entrusted the European Commission with such powers. However, the European Commission has taken significant, albeit limited measures where it has only had the tools to do so – allocating unused budget funds to fight the pandemic and its consequences. Many Europeans have called for something similar to the relocation mechanism that the Commission set up during the 2015 refugee crisis; a quick-action instrument based on the principle of solidarity. Both the Eurozone crisis and the migrant crisis were sudden, unexpected events that forced EU Member States to respond according to their own, national interests.

The problem is that the EU has no existing rules or legal grounds for this response. The lack of standards and principles of action is also evident in the pandemic. In such crises, when events are unpredictable, the EU seems chaotic and poorly coordinated, providing solutions that are unsupported and even counterproductive and time consuming.

The EU’s response to the Coronavirus crisis was disappointing at first, not so much because of its incoherence, but because of the widespread lack of preparedness for the challenge, a shortcoming shared by all Member States. The EU’s response was inadequate due to Member States’ refusal to act timely at a European level, for example, being slow to agree to the Commission’s proposal regarding the joint procurement of protective gear and medical supplies. Namely, the national governments made most

of their decisions in a panic, failed to cope with the European Commission's attitude, and often even acted contrary to the Commission's position.

But contrary to the negative predictions, the EU did not allow bad coordination at the beginning of the crisis, to confuse it. The economic reaction came quickly, and it is an area in which the EU has significant instruments and opportunities for action which it has put into full operation in the last month thus demonstrating its size and capabilities. The political scientist and President of the Center for Liberal Strategies from Bulgaria, Ivan Krastev emphasised that "even though Europeans were not impressed by the EU at the beginning of the crisis, they expressed a desire for more coordinated policies at the EU level. The consolidation of the EU project and empowerment of Brussels are not due to a federalist feeling in Europe, but rather to a concrete reason. Citizens realized during the crisis that nation-states need the EU in order to remain relevant in the world".³⁵ The EU must have a structure that allows it to react rapidly and effectively in emergency situations that will deliver better outcomes for its citizens and mitigate the impact on their lives and the economy. In that sense, the EU leadership must work harder and more devoted with the national leaders in order to pursue the EU interest as a whole. Based on that, we imply on the cohesion of preferences as an ability of the EU and the Member States to establish a single approach based on setting up common objectives and goals, based on the common interests. Or, as EU High Representative Josep Borrell emphasized: "Once again, we find ourselves living through an existential moment in time for the EU – because how we respond will affect the cohesion of our societies, the stability of our national political systems, and the future of European integration. Now is the time to heal the wounds from previous crises, not reopen them. To achieve this, the EU's institutions and policies need to win over the hearts and minds of Europe's citizens. And, in this regard, there is still much to be done".³⁶

Hence, it can be concluded that it is high time for the EU to take serious steps towards its own re-establishment based on its founding values, taking into account that the interest of one (the European Union) is the interest of all (its Member States).

³⁵ A. Robinet-Borgomano, *The Paradoxes of a Post-Covid-19 World: Three questions to Ivan Krastev*, Institut Montaigne, <https://www.institutmontaigne.org/en/blog/paradoxes-post-covid-19-world> (access 24.07.2020).

³⁶ J. Borrell, *The post-Coronavirus world is already here* (policy brief), p. 14, https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/the_post_Coronavirus_world_is_already_here?fbclid=IwAR0Xe0wdTnUxUiOrN1k790HIxYFW1Ddj1vcJx_NeS09jvnBgpH0-cDU3bSpg (access 30.04.2020).

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